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FICTION.

The Helmet of Navarre

A Tale of Love and Adventure

by Bertha Runkle

I.—A Flash of Lightning.

At the stairfoot the landlord stopped me.

"Here, lad, take a candle. The stairs are dark, and, since I like your looks, I would not have you break your neck."

"And give the house a bad name," I said.

"No fear of that; my house has a good name. There is no fairer inn in all Paris. And your chamber is a good chamber, though you will have larger, doubtless, when you are Minister of Finance."

This raised another laugh among the tavern idlers, for I had been bragging a bit of my prospects. I retorted:

"When I am, Maitre Jacques, look out for a rise in your taxes."

The laugh was turned on mine host, and I retired with the honors of that encounter. And though the stairs were the steepest I had ever climbed I had the breath and the spirit to whistle all the way up. What mattered that already I ached in every bone, that the stair was long and my bed but a heap of straw in the garret of a mean inn in a poor quarter? I was in Paris, the city of my dreams!

I am a Broux of St. Quentin. The great world has never heard of the Broux? No matter; they have existed these hundreds of years, Masters of the Forest, and faithful servants of the Dukes of St. Quentin. The great world has heard of the St. Quentins? I warrant you! As loudly as it has of Sully and Villeroi, Tremouille and Biron. That is enough for the Broux.

I was brought up to worship the saints and M. le Duc, and I loved and revered them alike by faith, for M. le Duc at court seemed as far away from us as the saints in heaven. But the year after King Henry III. was murdered monsieur came to live on his estate, to make high and low love him for himself.

In that bloody time, when the King of Navarre and the two Leagues were tearing our poor France asunder M. le Duc found himself between the devil and the deep sea. He was no friend to the League; for years he had stood between the King, his master, and the machinations of the Guises. On the other hand he was no friend to the Huguenots. "To seat a heretic on the throne of France were to deny God," he said. Therefore he came home to St. Quentin, where he abode in quiet for some three years, to the great wonderment of all the world.

Had he been a cautious man, a man who looked a long way ahead, his compeers would have understood readily enough that he was waiting to see how the cat would jump, taking no part in the quarrel lest he should mix with the losing side. But this theory jibed so ill with monsieur's character that not even his worst detractor could accept it. For he was known to all as a hotspur—a man who acted quickly and seldom counted the cost. Therefore his present conduct was a riddle, nor could any of the emissaries from King or League, who came from time to time to enlist his aid and went away without it, read the answer. The puzzle was too deep for them. Yet it was only this: to monsieur honor was more than a pretty word. If he could not see his cause honest he would not draw his sword, though all the curs in the land called him coward.

Thus he stayed alone in the chateau for a long, irksome three years. Monsieur was not of a reflective mind, content to stand aside and watch while other men fought out great issues. It was a weary procession of days to him. His only son, a lad a few years older than I, shared none of his father's scruples and refused point-blank to follow him into exile. He remained in Paris, where they knew how to be gay in spite of sieges. Therefore I, the Forester's son, whom monsieur took for a page, had a chance to come closer to my lord and be more to him than a mere servant, and I loved him as the dogs did; aye, and admired him for a fortitude almost more than human, in that he could hold himself passive here in furthest Picardie, while in Normandie and Ile de France battles raged and towns fell and captains won glory.

At length, in the opening of the year 1593, M. le Duc began to have a frequent visitor, a gentleman in no wise remarkable save for that he was accorded long interviews with monsieur. After these visits my lord was always in great spirits, putting on frisky airs like a stallion when he is led out of the stable. I looked for something to happen, and it was no surprise to me when M. le Duc announced one day, quite without warning, that he was done with St. Quentin and would be off in the morning for Mantes. I was in the seventh heaven of joy when he added that he should take me with him. I knew the King of Navarre was at Mantes—at last we were going to make history! There was no bound to my golden dreams, no limit to my future.

But my house of cards suffered a rude tumble, and by no hand but my father's. He came to monsieur and, presuming on an old servitor's privileges, begged him to leave me at home.

"I have lost two sons in monsieur's service," he said; "Jean, hunting in this forest, and Blaise, in the fray at Bidis. I have never grudged them to monsieur. But [illegible] all I have left."

Thus it came about that I was left behind, hidden in the hay-loft, when my duke rode away. I could not watch his going.

Though the days passed drearily yet they passed. Time does pass at length, even when one is young. It was July. The King of Navarre had moved up to St. Denis, in his siege of Paris, but most folk thought he would never win the city, the hotbed of the League. Of M. le Duc we heard no word till late one night a chance traveller, putting up at the inn in the village, told a startling tale. The Duke of St. Quentin, though known to have been at Mantes and strongly suspected of espousing Navarre's cause, had ridden calmly into Paris and opened his hotel! It was madness—madness sheer and stark. Thus far his religion had saved him, yet any day he might fall under the swords of the Leaguers.

My father came after hearing this tale to where I was lying on the grass the warm summer night, thinking hard thoughts of him for keeping me at home and spoiling my chances in life. He gave me straightway the whole of the story. Long before it was over I had sprung to my feet.

"Do you still wish to join M. le Duc?" he said.

"Father!" was all I could gasp.

"Then you shall go," he answered. That was not bad for an old man who had lost two sons for monsieur!

I set out in the morning, light of baggage, purse and heart. I can tell naught of the journey, for I heeded only that at the end of it lay Paris. I reached the city one day at sundown and entered without a passport at the St. Denis gate, the warders being hardly so strict as Mayenne supposed. I was dusty, footsore and hungry, in no guise to present myself before monsieur; wherefore I went no further that night than the inn of the Amour de Dieu, in the Rue des Coupejarrets.

Far below my garret window lay the street—a trench between the high houses. Scarce eight feet off loomed the dark wall of the house opposite. To me, fresh from the wide woods of St. Quentin, it seemed the desire of Paris folk to outhuddle in closeness the rabbits in a warren. So ingenious were they at contriving to waste no inch of open space that the houses, standing at the base but a scant street's width apart, even jutted out further at each story till they looked to be fairly toppling together. I could see into the windows up and down the way; could see the people move about within; hear opposite neighbors call to each other. But across from my aery were no lights and no people, for that house was shuttered tight from attic to cellar, its dark front as expressionless as a blind face. I marvelled how it came to stand empty in that teeming quarter.

Too tired, however, to wonder long, I blew out the candle and was asleep before I could shut my eyes.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

I sprang out of bed in a panic, thinking Henry of Navarre was bombarding Paris. Then, being fully roused, I perceived that the noise was thunder.

From the window I peered into floods of rain. The peals died away. Suddenly came a terrific lightning flash and I cried out in astonishment. For the shutter opposite was open, and I had a vivid vision of three men in the window.

Then all was dark again and the thunder shook the roof.

I stood straining my eyes into the night, waiting for the next flash. When it came it showed me the window barred as before. Flash followed flash; I winked the rain from my eyes and peered in vain. The shutter remained closed as if it had never been opened. Sleep rolled over me in a great wave as I groped my way back to bed.

II.—At the Amour de Dieu.

When I awoke in the morning the sun was shining broadly into the room, glinting in the little pools of water on the floor. I stared at them, sleepy-eyed, till recollection came to me of the thunders torn and the open shutter and the three men. I jumped up and ran to the window. The shutters opposite were closed; the house just as I had seen it first save for the long streaks of wet down the wall. The street below was one vast puddle. At all events, the storm was no dream, as I half believed the vision to be.

I dressed speedily and went downstairs. The inn-room was deserted save for Maitre Jacques, who with heat demanded of me whether I took myself for a prince, that I lay in bed till all decent folks